1:Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1942
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to be most prevalent. Rain-storms and cloud continue to alternate with brilliant periods throughout March and April, till in May the pleasant season of trade winds once more begins.

Under these humid conditions the west coasts of all the larger islands suffer the most, the east coasts being more open to the refreshing trades. Most favourably situated of all are the Small Islands, which are among the most pleasant spots in the whole archipelago. Here the temperature rarely rises above 95° Fahrenheit, even in the hot weather, and though the moisture makes this feel much hotter than a similar temperature in a dry climate, the nights are nearly always cool.

Geology.

While the geological composition of the larger islands of the group varies and most are mountainous, the highest peak in Santo rising to a height of some 4500 feet, there is little doubt that the whole group owes its position above the surface of the ocean to volcanic action. There is on many islands, including Malekula, evidence that this action has taken place in abrupt stages, seen in the coral terraces that rise in giant steps, clothed in thick jungle, up the mountain-sides, each representing a sudden elevation of the land. Though this has doubtless been the general trend, contrary cases of submergence are also on record, such as that of two reefs situated between Atchin and Vao which formerly were populous islands, the story of whose submergence is told below.[1]

Except in the case of a few well-populated coral islets, however, all minor natural features are obscured from observation by a uniform mass of dark green bush formed of huge trees and tangled undergrowth coming right down to the shore of the larger islands, relieved only in some cases, as in North Malekula, by the light green of the bamboo groves capping the mountains which rise behind. Here and there, if one approaches closer, small groves of coconut trees close to the coast mark the presence of human habitation. But, owing to the necessity of sheltering their dwellings from the hurricanes, it is rare that any house is ever visible from the sea. Save for the meeting of an occasional canoe, however thickly the land may be populated, the only sign of life visible from a boat is in the season for burning the bush for new gardens, when tall columns of smoke may be seen from the interior climbing up into the still air. In most places, also, the coast is fringed with coral reefs, making approach dangerous except by means of the few channels carved through them by the fresh water from some mountain stream.

Fauna.

On the other hand, though the sea abounds with sharks and certain low-lying areas are infested with mosquitoes and fever, no native need

[1] See Chapter XXII.

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CHAPTER II

THE SMALL ISLANDS AND VAO

133 THE term "Small Islands" is a pidgin-English one used by the natives of the coral islets fringing the north-east coast of Malekula in contrast to "Big Island," which they use in reference to the Malekulan mainland. These islets, each of which contains less than half a square mile of land, are due to outcrops of what Darwin calls a "fringing reef," caused by the action of coral polyps on the coast of land that has been raised by successive upward movements due to volcanic action. I have already called attention to the coral terraces on the adjacent mainland bearing witness to successive upheavals of this nature. Such fringing reefs are caused by the action of salt water, which encourages the growth of coral, combined with the contrary action of fresh water flowing down from the hills, which, together with the sediment which this fresh water brings with it, checks the activities of the polyps. The result is the formation of strong coral on the outer edge, combined with the decay or less vigorous growth of those parts nearest the land. Owing to the seaward flow of fresh water, in which coral will not grow, and to other causes, the outer edge breaks up into islands, between which and the land mass there forms a channel of varying depth. Owing to the causes outlined above, each Small Island has a good beach facing the channel, rises slightly towards the centre, and on the outer seaward side ends abruptly with a more or less elevated escarpment of coral rock. It is important to remember this formation for the bearing it has on the social organisation of these islands, owing to the greater desirability of the side facing the mainland and the bleakness of that facing the open sea.

There are seven of these islands, Vao, Atchin, Wala, Rano, Norsup, Uripiv and Uri, the inhabitants of which, together with those of the adjoining promontories of Pinalum and Tautu, form a loosely knit cultural unit of sufficient cohesion to refer to themselves collectively as "Sea Folk" (*muere n'das* in the language of Atchin) on account of their maritime situation and their common use of sea-going canoes, which the inhabitants of the mainland villages apart from the promontories do not possess. Each 16 island had at the time of my visit a population some 400 strong, with the exception of Uri, which was then almost depopulated, and Norsup, which is very small. Despite their small numbers and the loose cultural bond 197 already mentioned, however, the inhabitants of each island speak separate languages (excepting Wala and Rano, which, being very close

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PLATE I

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The beach Kowu, early in the morning before the departure of the canoes to the gardens on the mainland of Malekula, seen in the distance across the dividing sea. One native has already hoisted a European sail

[facing p. 25]

1:Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1942 0012 Malekula 0012

241 constructed fences are made on the Small Islands. The daily exodus of
512 canoes to the mainland, after the leisurely taking of the morning meal and when the sun is already high in the sky, is one of the most delightful sights in the whole archipelago. The return takes place during the late
[251] afternoon, when each canoe comes back separately, laden with yams [1] wrapped in leafy parcels, bunches of bananas, bread-fruit and other delicacies with which to prepare the evening meal, or towards the festive season, with larger quantities of yams to store on special yam-tables raised above the ground and roofed so that the accumulated food-stuffs may be kept dry.

701 Since few years pass without some small war breaking out between the various communities inhabiting these islands, it might be thought that their island position would fit them admirably to serve as small fortresses with the sea acting as a surrounding moat. But this is only partially the case, since, as we shall see in the chapter on warfare, the war-making unit is never the island, wars being usually internecine, founded on a standing enmity between two Sides of the same island, and when alliances take place these are with the corresponding Sides of other islands or with certain villages of the adjacent mainland, among all of whom the same dual organisation exists. These wars, however, rarely result in much bloodshed, and are but one aspect of the creative rivalry between otherwise friendly groups on which, as will be seen later, the social organisation of these islands is based.

APPROACH FROM THE SOUTH

133 If now we approach these islands from the south, whence the patrilineal influence has come and whence also most white men approach them after entering the archipelago at the port of call in the island of Fate some 100 miles to the south, our first introduction to the natural forces that have pushed up the North Central New Hebrides from the ocean bed is the active volcano of Lopevi rising sheer out of the water. Passing to the left of this, the next impressive sight is the large island of Ambrim, crowned by an active crater with innumerable small fissures around it, whence comes the volcanic dust that, mixing with the coral sand and humus of the Small Islands forty miles to the north-west, gives their dancing-grounds the peculiar surface that renders them so soft and firm for dancing, and at the same time is heavy enough not to rise. From the same source come also the currents that sweep in a north-westerly direction up the Malekulan coast, causing certain beaches to have a fine grey sand called "black sand" while others that

[1] Taro, the staple diet on Oba, is not grown here, for lack of terracing and irrigation, but a species, called by the name of *na-mbet*, has recently been introduced as food for pigs.

1:Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1942
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escape these currents are unmixed with this and therefore called "white sand." On these same currents float the pieces of pumice-stone that the natives use for various purposes, including the removal of superfluous hair from their chins, while from the island of Ambrim itself is brought in canoes the hard volcanic stone from which rain-stones (see Plate XXIV, 1) are carved. The Ambrim volcano plays, moreover, a very active part in beliefs concerning the home of the dead held in the Small Islands, whence (though Vao, the most northerly of these islets, lies forty miles away) all the dead of high rank are said to journey down the east coast of Malekula and over the ten-mile strait to Ambrim, where they climb up to the crater and there for evermore dance every night and rest sleeping by day. Rivers in fact goes so far as to suggest that the presence of volcanoes such as this and others in Melanesia may to some extent have determined the settlement of early migrants from other volcanic areas having similar beliefs.

Like all New Hebridean islands, however, apart from the smoke sometimes issuing from the crater and the accompanying dull red glow which is by no means always present, Ambrim, as well as the opposing Malekulan coast, wears the monotonous dark green mantle of bush growing right down to the water's edge, showing no sign of the life going on in the native villages which it engulfs. At most points approach is dangerous even at a distance, owing to the treacherous reefs that jut out sometimes far into the sea. On one of these, sprawling out from the Malekulan promontory of Bong-na-un near Pangkumu, there stands a giant upright coral block, which, according to the belief held in some of the Small Islands, represents the Guardian Ghost waiting to devour the ghosts of the dead unless propitiated with the gift of a pig, which in turn is the ghost of one sacrificed by surviving kinsmen at the dead man's grave.[1] It is from here that, having passed this ordeal, the dead man gathers fuel with which to light a beacon to attract the attention of the ghostly ferryman on Ambrim who will conduct him to the opposite shore, and any small pieces of driftwood or dried banana skins that may be seen floating off it are said by the natives to be his canoes.

After this, the heavy coastline continues unrelieved by islands till a long low promontory stretching out into the sea encloses a wide mangrove shark-infested swamp behind which, in the low foothills, are said to live sorcerers called Ghamba Lep,[2] capable of flight and of assuming the shape of snakes and other things and of so harming the dwellers of the mainland villages.

[1] This is the belief held in Atchin and Wala which contrasts with the Vao belief (see p. 13) that the Guardian Ghost is met with in the cave. For further information on this see pp. 227, 233.

[2] See p. 238.

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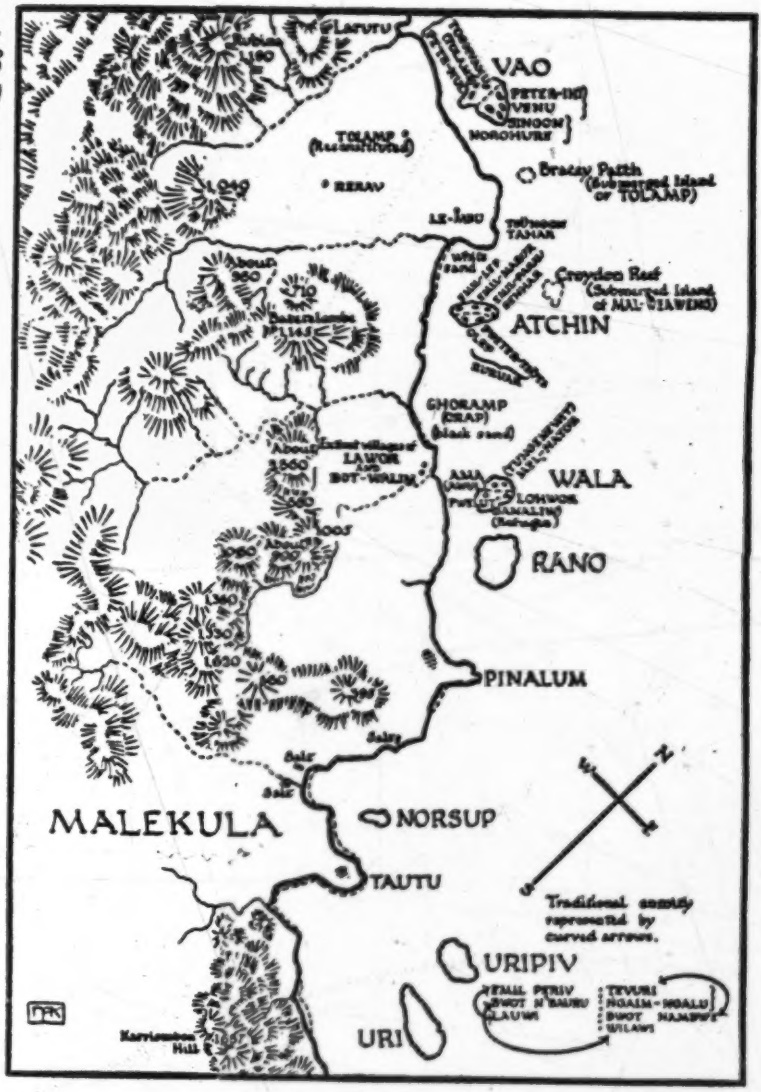

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MAP II

Sketch-map of the Small Islands.

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From here on the view changes. No longer do the waves beat direct upon inhospitable shores. For here the reef has been pushed out from the cliff and broken into the series of coral islets known as the Small Islands. First Uri, swampy and low. Then Uripiv, clothed with luxuriant vegetation, where, in the year 1895, Rear-Admiral Boyle Somerville, then a lieutenant on a surveying expedition in H.M.S. *Dart*, landed, and to his surprise and joy found himself in the midst of one of the Maki performances which he later graphically described in his book, *The Chartmakers*.[1] Further inshore is the small island of Norsup. These three islets are somewhat isolated from the others, and to the voyager coming from the south the full beauty of the Small Island scene does not unfold itself until he rounds the promontory of Pinalum. Here, if he is lucky, he may hear the gongs booming from the village that nestles at its base.

But as a rule he will hear nothing but the waves beating against the rocks, or, on calm days, the cry of sea-birds perhaps migrating down the coast. Before him, nestling low into the water, is Rano, and to the left, sombre and hot, the long beach behind which rise the mountains of North Malekula. No sooner is Rano passed than Wala opens up, slightly more elevated and comparatively densely populated, so close to Rano that the noises of everyday life may be heard across the narrow channel dividing them. Opposite Wala, on the Malekulan coast, now lost in bush, are the sites of the extinct villages of Lawor and Bot-walim, from which, as already mentioned, the Small Islands have derived so many new forms of megalithic culture. A little beyond these the "black-sand" beach called Ghoramp,[2] coloured grey by the action of volcanic dust, where lies the cave entered by the dead of all Small Islanders of high rank before setting out on their ghostly journey to Ambrim. Beyond this lies Atchin, and on the mainland facing it, another long beach, made this time of white coral sand, on which during the hot middle of the day the islanders' canoes may be seen ranged in groups, according to the Atchin village from which they have come, while their owners work in their mainland gardens.

This seems at first sight the last of the Small Islands, since beyond it lies the great promontory called Tsungon Ta-har, which in the language of Atchin signifies "Lip of (the creator-god) Ta-har." The word "lip" is used in the Small Islands in the same way as we use the word "nose" disguised as "naze" or "ness" to describe a promontory. Ta-har is equivalent to the Vao creator-god Ta-ghar, whose attributes will be discussed later. Around this promontory the sea, even on the calmest day, is never still. For this reason natives from Atchin, who always travel to Wala by canoe, when travelling to Vao, which lies beyond the

[1] See p. 335.

[2] This is the Vao pronunciation of the word. In the clipped dialect used by the young men on Atchin it is Orap.

1:Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1942
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133 point, as a rule cross over to the mainland and from there go by foot behind the promontory till they come out in front of this most northerly island, to which, sooner or later, they will get taken in a Vao canoe. For those who venture by sea the "Lip of Ta-har" is found to divide itself into three smaller promontories, after rounding the first of which the extreme north-eastern point of Vao comes into view. Seaward, the surf breaks on the two half-submerged reefs of Tolamp and Mal-weaweng already referred to, which were once islands inhabited by folk some of whose descendants are now refugees on Vao. Keeping well to landward of these, and rounding the last point, the whole island of Vao comes into view, sprawling in the tropical sea.

THE ISLAND OF VAO

Main physical features. First view of the natives.

This island is roughly square, containing about 250 acres, or rather less than half a square mile of land, on which about 400 people live.[1] Its curving coastline accounts for the fact that its longest east-to-west axis is rather over half a mile long.

[137] The whole island is covered with vegetation, but the humus in which it grows is in most places not more than a foot and a half deep. Below this, on the side facing the channel, is a layer, not more than a foot thick, of sand, below which is a thin layer of hard volcanic ash.[2] Below

[312] this again is sand, in which fresh water appears when the level of the sea is reached. It is from this source that the natives obtain their water supply, by means of artificially dug pits. The level rises and falls with the rise and fall of the tide. Its comparative freshness is probably due to the filtering action of the sand through which it passes, but its sea origin is seen in the fact that when left to stand it very quickly becomes stale.[3]

[134] This sandy soil exists only on the south and west parts of the island. To the north and east it is replaced by a kind of clay formed by the decomposition of coral rocks. The highest point marked on the Admiralty chart is 120 feet. Seen from the mainland, however, this elevation is hardly visible, on account of the trees which from a distance appear to cover the whole ground. For, as is the case with all the Small Islands, no sign of habitation is seen from the sea.

Only as we approach the islet itself do we become aware of the rare

[1] For discussion of past and present population see Appendix I.

[2] Godefroy, 1, 1933, pp. 31, 32. He adds that the thin layer of hard volcanic ash is found also in Oba, where the word for ash is *gwis*, and that for the hard volcanic layer is *gwngwes*.

[3] Really fresh water can be obtained only from the streams that flow from the mountains on the adjacent mainland, which the natives bring over in large hollow bamboos, the free ends of which are stopped with leaves.

1:Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1942
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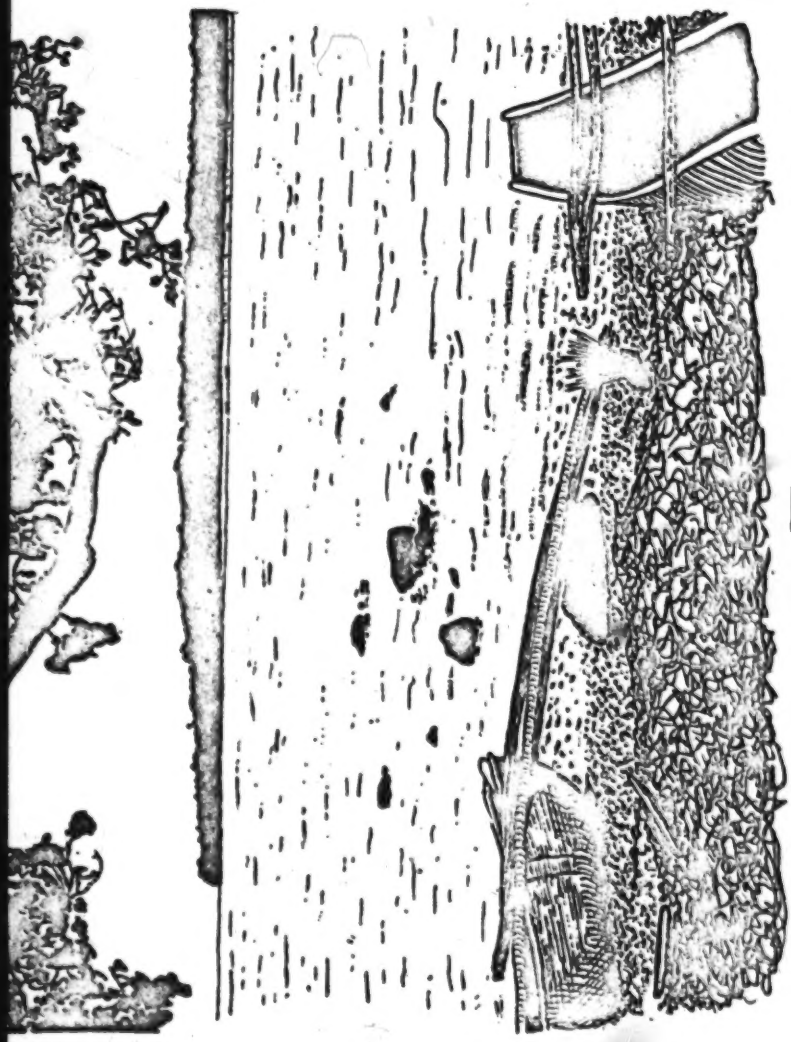

FIG. 1

View of Vao from a landing-place on the mainland of Malekula. The broad beach on Vao is Kowu, belonging to the Superior Side of Vao and used by the double-village of Pete-hui-Togh-vanu. In the foreground are the stems of two small coastal canoes waiting for owners who are tilling their mainland gardens.

1:Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1942
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beauty of Vao. Here, facing the channel, on the island's south-western shore, is the lovely beach called Kowu,[1] forming a long shallow bay, bounded on its north-western extremity by a wide reef. If we have the good fortune to arrive not too early in the morning, before the exodus to the mainland has begun, we may see no fewer than eighty canoes ranged side by side, following the curve of the beach, high up on the sand, out of reach of the tide. Slowly the natives come down, the men with their guns bought from white traders, without which they never move off the island, the women with baskets, their babies on their backs, the children playing and occasionally helping.

After much talk and laughter, each family group will separately carry or drag its canoe down to the sea, and soon a fleet of perhaps fifty canoes will be crossing the channel, each heading for its own landing-place on the mainland opposite. If the wind is favourable, sails made of pandanus strips dyed red, plaited by the women and sewn together by the men, are hoisted, each shaped like an inverted triangle.[2] If there is no wind, or if it is in the wrong quarter, paddles alone must do the work, and the gay cries of the paddlers echo over the sea.

WALK THROUGH THE VILLAGE DANCING-GROUNDS

Men's paths and women's paths. The sacred way.

If, having watched this pleasing scene, we now turn towards the interior of the island, we find the choice of two paths. Perhaps a few stray natives are still coming down to the shore. Of these we notice that the men with confident air take one, while the women, more modest with their load of baskets, take the other. At the spot where the men come out on to the shore there is a wall of stones[3] lining the path, which has been consecrated by the sacrifice of a large number of tusked boars. This marks the shoreward end of the great sacred way that leads from one end of the island to the other. The stone wall itself and the boars sacrificed on it indicate among other things that this section of the way is taboo to women and to male children who have not yet taken the first step in their formal religious life by themselves sacrificing their first boars.

This way leads upwards towards the centre of the island. About thirty yards from its abutment on the shore it is joined by the women's path, and from here onward it may be used by women as well as men, since no further sanctified monuments lie on this part of the way. On approaching the first village dancing-ground, it divides once more, the

[1] Godefroy (1, 1933, p. 30), following his predecessor, Père Jamond, supposes this word to be derived from the English word "cove," and tells a circumstantial story to prove it. This is a false derivation. It is a native name and occurs in song-language as *ke-u*.

[2] See p. 460.

[3] I did not record the name for this wall on Vao. In Atchin it is *na-wor*.

3: Harrisson N-5 (1934-1935) 1936
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Big Nambas

but they do not attempt to help the heathens, unless the heathens come down to the often unhealthy coast and adopt the externals of Christianity. The Missions do not go to the natives, and in Santo, Malekula, and Malo, out of about six thousand Christians, only thirty live away from the sea. In the hills there is no malaria, consumption, or elephantiasis; when the hill-men come to the sea they quickly go down with fever, and the slightest additional sickness will kill them. Mission history is a ghastly list of great settlements created by the Missions on the coast, and now almost or entirely extinct. Aneityum, west Malekula, and west Santo show plenty of examples. I have already made the point that it is similarly fatal for missions to neglect their converts in outlying districts; this is done all over the group. The recruiters do the same

thing, only in a different way, by taking bush natives to work in plantations; they are more concerned to keep their men well, because if a man dies his tribe will not work for that recruiter any more. Long ago Anthony Trollope wrote a delightful account of the benefits due to Queensland blackbirding; Campbell (1874, p. 69), whose account of the southern isles in 1864 is lucid and unbiased, demonstrated the fallacy in Trollope's reasoning, and further pointed out that ex-plantation natives often become the most dangerous on their return to the bush, which is equally true to-day, especially of trained native police.

In my section of the Big Nambas I have shown that modern warfare, unlike the old form, is socially harmful; all natives should be disarmed; vigorous medical work started and maintained throughout the islands; the fish *Bam-*